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**SOFIA:
An Interreg Italy-France Project to Promote
Accessible Tourism**

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**SOFIA:
An Interreg Italy-France Project to Promote Accessible Tourism**

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Tourism is a key sector for the European Union from both a cultural and economic perspective. Tourism enterprises have been severely affected by COVID-19 and require recovery strategies. “Accessible tourism” or “tourism for all”, i.e., tourism with establishments and services capable of meeting the needs (including special needs) of all people, also holds great potential in this respect. By adopting an approach more oriented towards the principles of design for all and more knowledgeable, the tourism market could in fact meet a growing demand that has so far been largely neglected. Tourist operators, however, generally lack the appropriate skills and sometimes they are not even aware about accessibility issues, other than in a cursory manner. As a result, tourist establishments and services, with a few exceptions, are often totally inadequate to host disabled tourists. This paper, after outlining the more general issue, highlighting the potential of accessible tourism, details the recent and significant experience of an Interreg Italy-France project called SOFIA. Through this project, dozens of young Italian and French tourism enterprises received advice and training to improve the accessibility of their establishments and services with a view to tourism for all.

Keywords: *Accessible Tourism, Universal Design, Tourism Enterprises, Disability, Interreg.*

Introduction

Tourism is a key development area for the European Union. “The tourism industry directly and indirectly employs 27 million people, which accounts for 11.2 % of total EU employment, and which, in 2019, accounted for 10.3% of EU gross domestic product” (European Parliament resolution of 25 March 2021 on establishing an EU strategy for sustainable tourism, 2020/2038(INI)).

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously disrupted this economic, cultural and social sector, which requires new stimuli to fully recover (Wickramasinghe and Naranpanawa 2023).

Within the general area of tourism, accessible tourism or tourism for all holds considerable potential, including as a new stimulus for development and recovery.

The concept of tourism for all (or universal design for tourism) refers to the willingness and ability to host all possible tourists, including those with motor, sensory, and cognitive disabilities (Zheng et al. 2023), with autism, or the elderly, or with those with problems such as heart disease, obesity, arthrosis (Bieganowski and Euler-Ziegler 2004) and the like, or simply people with temporary disabilities, pregnant women, people with special dietary needs, etc. (Yau et al. 2004).

It is a very important issue, in terms of public health, for a more socially civilised management of tourist establishments and services, in relation to a more equitable enjoyment of tourist assets (e.g., Cetorelli and Guido 2018, Vignola 2016), but also from an economic point of view.

In fact, if only people with some form of disability and/or over 65 years of age are included, the potential demand in the EU alone is estimated to be 127.5 million (Buhalis and Michopoulou 2011).

However, the figure is underestimated, because these people, when they are able to do so, travel with families and/or caregivers who often cancel their holidays if they cannot find adequate establishments for their relatives, partners or friends.

According to the data collected by the EU, every year economic opportunities amounting to EUR 142 billion are lost because of tourism infrastructures unsuitable for disabled people. This figure amounts to an employment potential equal to 3.4 million jobs in the tourism sector (Cerruti et al. 2020, p.120).

The number of people who may need to use accessible tourism facilities and services will grow considerably in the coming years, at least in Europe, as a result of the increase in the elderly population. One of the emerging consumer trends, moreover, is specifically associated with a growing demand for inclusiveness (Angus and Westbrook 2020).

Despite its great importance, however, the issue of accessible tourism is still poorly known by tourism entrepreneurs. Only a few tourist establishments are properly equipped to provide suitable accommodations for all and managed by operators sensitive to this issue. Finally, communication concerning the actual equipment of accommodation facilities is often ineffective, so that tourists with disabilities often cannot know for sure, when they book their holidays, whether they will actually be accommodated or not.

In view of these considerations, the paper documents the recent experience of a cross-border Interreg project called SOFIA (Servizi per un'Ospitalità Fruibile, Inclusiva e Accogliente/Services pour un Accueil Ouvert, Facile et Inclusif; translated as: Services for Accessible, Inclusive and Welcoming Accommodation).

SOFIA Project (<https://interreg-maritime.eu/web/sofia>; <https://www.sofiaseservices.eu/>) was financed by Interreg Marittimo-Italy-France-Maritime Program, IV Call (<https://interreg-maritime.eu/>; <https://interreg-maritime.eu/it/progetti/progetti-finanziati>).

SOFIA project was developed from March 2020 to August 2022.

The project aimed at promoting the growth of competitiveness and innovation of newly-formed small and medium-sized enterprises (2-5 years old) in the tourism sector, through the acquisition of new expertises in the field of accessible tourism/tourism for all, for the purpose of reaching an expanding market target such as tourists with special needs (in particular disabled people) and their families.

SOFIA involved partners from four of the five regions involved in the Interreg Marittimo-Italy-France-Maritime Program: Liguria, Sardinia, Corsica and the PACA Region. The involved enterprises, on the other hand, cover all five regions of the Programme, and therefore Tuscany, in addition to the previous ones, is also included.

SOFIA Project was carried out by an Italian and French public-private partnership with the Department of Architecture and Design, DAD, of the University of Genoa as the leader. The other partners are: Team, a Ligurian company providing consultancy services in human resources and marketing; Accademia del Turismo, a Ligurian training organisation focusing on tourism and related activities; Impronta, a Sardinian cooperative society for slow tourism; CO.M.MENTIS, a Corsican company dealing with territorial management, communication and marketing; Dracénie Provence Verdon Agglomération, a union of 23 municipalities in the Var region of France that manages different territorial services including tourism ones.

The project was divided into several phases:

- a first phase of defining a *protocol of services* to ensure the overcoming of architectural, cultural, and communication barriers in tourism enterprises;
- a step to identify *experts* (architects, psychologists, communication experts) for business advice on defined services;
- *focus groups* among these experts and others to choose common intervention strategies;
- identification of suitable tourist *enterprises*;
- provision of advisory *services* to these enterprises;
- *networking* and start-up to the *certification* of the involved enterprises in the Program territories.

The project was carried out with some difficulty as it was developed right during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when tourism companies, especially the younger ones, were experiencing serious troubles (Liu et al. 2023). Just to

illustrate the idea, according to data from the Banca d'Italia the decrease of tourist presences in Italy in 2020 was equal to 52.3% and, for foreign tourists, 70.3% (Demma 2021).

The project stages are described below, making reference to the critical issues faced and the promising results obtained.

State of the Art

In order to correctly set up the project and to determine the protocol of services to be provided to enterprises so as to increase their expertises in accessible tourism, the SOFIA partnership first carried out a study to map the state of the art as regards accessible tourism, with particular reference to the Italian and French situation.

The main basic Italian and French regulations concerning building accessibility were examined (e.g., the Decreto Ministeriale, DM n.236 del 14/06/1989 for Italy and the Circulaire interministérielle n.2007-53 DGUHC dated 30/11/2007 for France). A number of regulations were also examined because, even though not explicitly dedicated to the accessibility of tourist facilities, they include important indications concerning the use of buildings by disabled persons (e.g., The Italian Nuovo Codice di Prevenzione Incendi/Fire Prevention Code – DM 18/10/2019). Some regulations of the involved regions were also examined (e.g., the Legge Regionale della Sardegna sul turismo n.16 dated 28/07/2017 - which includes some interesting guidelines and incentives for the accessibility of tourist establishments).

Then some important ISO technical standards were also analysed, such as the ISO 21401:2018, *Tourism and related services. Sustainability management system for accommodation establishments – Requirements*, and especially the ISO 21902:2021, *Tourism and related services - Accessible tourism for all - Requirements and recommendations*, which is the first international standard of the ISO family focused on the concept of accessible tourism for all. The technical standard provides reference requirements and recommendations for tourism operators who wish to improve their services by ensuring a higher degree of accommodation and inclusiveness.

The analysis then considered the main labels for accessible tourism in Italy and France, i.e., the most important and well-known initiatives aimed at certifying the quality of tourist accommodation for persons with disabilities, promoted by accredited private or public organisations.

Examples of the analysed brands include:

- *Bandiera Lilla*, a well-known Italian label, awarded to municipalities that have implemented significant initiatives to improve their tourist accessibility (especially in relation to motor, visual and hearing disabilities and to food pathologies and intolerances) (www.bandieralilla.it);
- V4A®, a brand promoted by Village For All, a well-known Italian company based in Emilia-Romagna, specialised in accessible tourism, which helps

companies, public and private organisations and associations to deal with this market sector (<https://www.villageforall.net/it/>). Village For All has also developed Project For All (<https://projectforall.net/publicazioni/>) to distribute guides and operating manuals through the web for the design and management of accommodation and beach establishments;

- Handy Superabile, the label name of a well-known Italian association based in Tuscany focused on verifying the real accessibility of tourist establishments (<https://www.handysuperabile.org/>);
- Ecospiagge per tutti, a quality label originating from the collaboration between Legambiente (a well-known Italian environmental association) and Village for All, which is awarded to sustainable, responsible and inclusive beach establishments (<https://www.legambienteturismo.it/ecospiagge/>);
- Bed&Care, a network of companies and social cooperatives providing assistance to people with reduced mobility to ensure an adequate enjoyment of the tourist experience (<https://www.bedandcare.it/#>);
- Tourisme et Handicap, a well-known French label, created in 2001 by the association Tourisme et Handicap together with the French state, which can be awarded (with a validity of 5 years) to all types of enterprises in the tourism sector, as a reward for those entrepreneurs who strive to make their services and establishments more accessible (Amiaud 2012). The logo of this label, affixed at the entrance of the affiliated establishments and on all their documentation, provides guests with a guarantee of accessibility according to disability (hearing, cognitive, motor, visual), depicted through four pictograms. Every enterprise can obtain the label on a minimum of two of these categories. The requirements of this label are much stricter than those required by French regulations and, therefore, it represents the main national reference for the sector (<http://www.tourisme-handicaps.org/les-labels/>);
- Var Accessible, a qualification introduced by the Agence de Développement Touristique du Var and the Offices de Tourisme du Var, in 2012, which identifies the companies that are committed to complying with French regulatory guidelines on accessibility. Var Accessible usually represents a first step towards the more stringent standards of Tourisme et Handicap.

Finally, some significant experiences and case studies were analysed, paying particular attention to the geographical area covered by the SOFIA project.

They include, by way of example only: the Agriturismo Val Chiappella (<https://www.valchiappella.it>), in the hinterland of Chiavari, in Liguria, with a teaching farm for children with motor and psychosensory disabilities; the Luna Blu accommodation establishment (<http://www.aut-aut.eu>) in La Spezia (Liguria), set up by the “AUT AUT” (Autonomy Autism) Foundation with the aim of introducing young adults with autism into the working world; the Village Vacances Lou Bastidon (www.loubastidou.com), in the Var region of France, completely accessible to people with mobility disabilities and with various services for people with other types of disabilities; the holiday villages Veraclub

Costa Rey (<https://www.lptour.it/villaggio-per-disabili-in-sardegna/>), Eden Village Colostrai and Villaggio Carovana (<https://www.villaggiocarovana.it>), all located in Sardinia and possessing some strong points in terms of accessibility; the initiatives for beach accessibility of Golfo degli Angeli Onlus (<https://www.cooperativagolfodegliangeli.com/mare-e-disabilita>); the Spiaggia per tutti (<https://www.villaggio.org/online/centro-benedetto-acquarone/area-disabili/la-spiaggia-per-tutti/>) and NoiHandiamo (<http://www.noihandiamo.org>) initiatives for beach accessibility in Tigullio, Liguria; the construction of an accessible floating pier and accessible services in the Leisure port Marina Chiavari (<http://marina-chiavari.it>) to provide access to the sea and the performance of sports activities at sea (e.g., with Hansa Class boats); the initiatives for the extended enjoyment (motor and sensory disabilities) of the Parco Nazionale dell' Arcipelago della Maddalena (<https://www.disabili.com/viaggi/viaggi-a-tempo-libero/pagine-interne-parchi-accessibili-2009/parchi09-sardegna-maddalena>); the accessible paths of the Lago di Baratz (<https://www.disabili.com/viaggi/viaggi-a-tempo-libero/pagine-interne-parchi-accessibili-2009/parchi09-sardegna-baratz>); the Over the view initiatives, funded by Sardegna Ricerche (POR Sardegna FESR 2014-2020 – Axis I “Scientific Research, Development and Innovation”), on the accessibility of museums for people with sensory disabilities (<http://overtheview.crs4.it>); the initiatives of Monumenti aperti a tutti: Cultura senza barriere (translated as: Monuments accessible to everyone: culture without barriers) for the production of easy-to-read guides and the provision of services and aids for people with motor disabilities to visit the old town of Cagliari (<https://monumentiaperti.com/it/comuni-della-xxiv-edizione/cagliari/cultura-senza-barriere/>); the Rolli for all (<http://www.visitgenoa.it/rolli-all>) initiative, which organises guided tours of the cultural heritage of Genoa with expert guides for people with disabilities (blind people, autistic people, aphasic people, deaf people, etc.); the light transport in the old town of Genoa by Tree Cycle (<https://www.treecycle.eu/>); the initiatives of Emozionabile (<http://www.emozionabile.it/>) for the enjoyment of particularly exciting and extreme experiences aimed at people with disabilities (from climbing to parachuting, from rafting to sports driving).

The overall picture resulting from this examination of the state of the art is very extensive and complex. In fact, the mapping of the possible issues related to the accessibility of tourist establishments highlights very different situations, depending on the different special needs that customers may have, the type of tourist service and establishment, and the specific nature of this service or establishment within the reference context. The subject of tourism accessibility therefore has different interpretations depending on the types of disability considered, the type of tourism establishment or service, their location, and the related issues such as transport (Valentini and Landi 2013, Alyfanti et al. 2011, Orlandi 2010).

From the scenario outlined above, it is clear that the barriers to be overcome are not only architectural, but also cultural and communication-related (Stuchlikova and Botlikova 2021, Nigg and Peters 2022).

All this was taken into account in the definition of the protocol of services and in the subsequent project stages.

Development Stages and Methodology of the SOFIA Project

The Protocol of Services

After the preliminary phase involving the study of the state of the art, and on the basis of the results obtained, a *protocol of services* was set up and drafted.

The protocol consists of two parts:

- 1) a kind of *methodological and operational manual* describing the possible action guidelines aimed at improving the accessibility of tourist services and establishments;
- 2) a *catalogue of the services* that can be delivered (free of charge, of course) to participating enterprises (defining the economic value of the service only for the purpose of calculating the *de minimis* for each enterprise).

The *methodological manual* has been set up as a kind of matrix, cross-referencing the main special user needs and the types of tourist establishments and services.

Special needs are those of: people with coeliac disease, allergies, asthma; pregnant women and people with pushchairs or walkers; people who are overweight, have a heart condition, are elderly, convalescent, hemiplegic, claudicant; children and people of short stature; wheelchair users (independent, accompanied, in electric wheelchairs); people with mental and psychological disabilities (impaired cognitive and interpersonal skills, autism spectrum disorders and people with mental disorders, anxious states); epileptic people; people with sensory disabilities in the area of hearing (deaf, hard of hearing); people with sensory disabilities in the area of sight (blind, visually impaired, colour-blind).

The tourist facilities/services taken into consideration are: hotel and hotel-like establishments; non-hotel establishments; outdoor accommodation establishments; typical restaurants with table service; fast food establishments; cultural and tourist attractions and services (arts, traditions, leisure and shopping); outdoor tourist attraction and services (nature, games and sports).

In the matrix, specific needs were cross-referenced with the identified tourist establishments or services and vice versa, and the possible needs, possible services that SOFIA could render to the businesses concerned were identified for each cross-reference.

Just to give an example (to better understand the matrix logic), the following is one of the possible attentions suggested in relation to the possible special needs of persons with autism spectrum disorders in hotel establishments: “in the case of persons with autism spectrum disorders, in addition to the attentions already expressed regarding accommodation, certain characteristics of the locations must be taken into account, with reference to environmental psychology and proxemics. Spaces with light control - so as not to be excessively bright or, on the contrary, dark - are to be preferred, as well as diffuse and, in rooms, dimmable lighting, with the possibility of night light control. Spaces that are not too narrow (a lift can be a challenging place), or too wide and without references, are preferable. Rooms and

spaces must have good sound comfort and insulation, avoiding reverberation and echo effects. Pay attention to microclimatic conditions in order to provide comfortable situations (temperature, ventilation, humidity) that can affect mood. Social and distribution spaces with curvilinear layouts and where special areas, furnishings and equipment allow avoiding the creation of long corridors, resulting in more open and appealing spaces (views, characterising elements) where attention can shift from one element to another as one moves through the space. Colour is also something that must be carefully managed, avoiding the strongest hues. The patterns can be broad or evoke recognisable and pleasing shapes” (these types of indications were formulated, with the collaboration of experts, in relation to all tourism needs and services, during meetings of the SOFIA project partnership, in view of the study about the state of the art).

To provide another example, in the case of hearing-impaired people, in hotel establishments, as regards their need to interact with the reception desk, the following indications, as well as others, were provided: “it is recommended that the reception area, as well as other areas for use by people with hearing disabilities, are equipped with a magnetic induction loop system to facilitate communication with people with cochlear implants and hearing aids equipped with a telecoil. The use of subtitles, or smartphone messaging applications that can facilitate communication, is very important. Facilitating speech comprehension by punctuating words and speaking slowly, avoiding standing in the background, asking if a louder tone of voice is desired (can be annoying) is important. Make sure the individual has understood the communication. The receptionist must remember to: treat the disabled guest with the same helpfulness, consideration and courtesy reserved for other customers; address the disabled person with naturalness and spontaneity directly, not the family members or any accompanying persons; adapt, without getting impatient, to longer times when dealing with the customer”.

Likewise, indications were provided regarding all the other specific needs listed above, in relation to the different tourism establishments considered and the identified needs.

The methodological manual was updated during the course of the project and made available online (in Italian and French, the project languages: <https://www.sofiaservices.eu/it/>; <https://www.sofiaservices.eu/fr/>).

A *catalogue of the services* that the identified experts (see later in this paper), in accordance with the methodological manual, could provide to the participating enterprises was then defined. These services include: company check-up; improvement of the accessibility and usability conditions of places by integrating solutions for better overall affordance (colours, materials, path layouts, signs, lighting, plants); identification of requirements and solutions meeting the needs of hearing-impaired and deaf people; identification of requirements and solutions meeting the needs of visually impaired and blind people; reception criteria for people with mental and cognitive disorders; reception criteria for families with small children; layout of outdoor areas and accesses; information and emergency management criteria for people with disabilities; indications about the characteristics of furnishings (reception, etc.); indications about food (menus, etc.) and the way they are provided; outline design or revision of online communication (website

and social); relations with external services (taxis, tour guides, etc.); staff training plans; permanent monitoring plan for accessibility conditions.

The Identification of Experts and the Focus Groups

Once the protocol of services had been defined, 20 experts were identified through four separate selection procedures in Liguria, Sardinia, Corsica and Var. The experts selected in each region possess different certified skills and are: architects with expertise in accessibility, psychologists/educators with specific skills covering different types of disabilities, and communication and marketing experts.

These experts were tasked with providing consultancy services to the enterprises participating in the SOFIA project, in accordance with the defined service protocol.

Before proceeding, however, many focus groups were organised (all online, because they were held during the pandemic period) so that the experts could determine common methodological and operational principles with the project partnership.

No less than 25 focus groups were organised: some about the service protocol, some to share the principles guiding our work, some very operational ones (e.g., about data entry on the project website) and some involving external experts.

Seminars were held, for example, about a series of subjects: the regulatory framework and certification processes; the various types (motor, psycho-sensory) of disabilities, and also about accommodation for the elderly, pregnant women, families with children; architectural barriers; accommodation and customer care; enterprise check-ups; staff training; communication and marketing. Some of the promoters of the labels and case studies identified in the state-of-the-art analysis were invited to lead these focus groups (e.g., the owners of Village for All, Handy Superabile, Adam Accessibility and others). In addition, speakers included representatives of disability associations, representatives of national and regional organisations and associations working on disability legislation, validation of accessible building projects, and sports for disabled people.

This part of the project turned out to be even more interesting than originally planned because of the enthusiastic participation of many external experts who appreciated the aims and the approach of the SOFIA project.

In the midst of the pandemic period, the online method used to hold the focus groups proved to be especially effective, allowing for more meetings than initially planned.

Enterprise Identification

While the group of experts was preparing through focus groups, calls for tenders were made to select the tourism enterprises to which the experts were to provide their consultancy services.

This stage of the project proved to be very difficult mostly because of the pandemic period (unforeseeable at the SOFIA project set-up stage). The Covid-19 pandemic has actually caused great problems for tourism enterprises and especially for the specific target group to which the SOFIA project referred, i.e., enterprises from 2 to 5 years of age.

This target group was specifically defined by the Interreg Marittimo-Italy-France-Maritime Program, because 2 to 5 year old companies are the most fragile and at risk: they are no longer in the start-up phase, often with dedicated funding, but they neither have a sufficiently consolidated experience and customer base.

However, for these very reasons, during the pandemic period, it has been extremely difficult to find companies 2-5 years old willing to join the project; in fact, many entrepreneurs feared they would have to close their business (and several were forced to do so) and were therefore more concerned about the survival of their company than about acquiring new, even though useful, skills.

Furthermore, even though the consultancy services of the SOFIA project were absolutely free of charge, they were still monetised, thus affecting the *de minimis* of the involved companies. Although the economic amounts were not particularly large, the bureaucratic mechanism for the management of this procedure made the involvement of companies even more complicated.

Nevertheless, thanks to the stubbornness of the project partners, 41 interested enterprises were identified and actively joined the project.

Results

As a result of the work carried out in the stages explained above, services were finally provided to the 41 involved enterprises and the establishment of a network among them was also started.

Services for the Enterprises

The tourist enterprises involved in the SOFIA project (24 Italian and 17 French) are: hotels, hotel-restaurants, agritourisms, inns, B&Bs, room rentals, holiday homes and campsites; typical restaurants, pubs and wine shops; enterprises producing typical confectionery, agricultural and handicraft items; tourist guides, tourist transport services by car, bicycle, boat; recreational and sports services; experiential, cultural and small museum services.

The activities of most of these establishments are briefly described (in the official languages of the project) on the project website (<https://www.sofiase rvices.eu/it/>).

The services rendered by the SOFIA project to these companies, through the identified experts, concern: architectural adaptation for the accessibility of indoor and outdoor spaces; adaptation of the accessibility of means of transport or sports equipment; staff training; affixing of signs (including in rented vehicles); communication plans (clearer and more accessible information on social networks, websites, etc.); planning of activities for customers more adapted to special needs;

sensory trails through the nature; dedicated menus (for special dietary needs); design of immersive virtual experiences for sites with complex accessibility (e.g., caves); etc.

Networking and Certification

Once the establishments had received services to make them more adequate from the point of view of accessibility, the SOFIA project started to organise meetings to network the services these companies could provide in the various territories.

It is extremely important, within a logic of tourism for all, that tourists can find a suitable network of services in a given area. It does not make sense, for example, for a disabled tourist to have a hotel facility that can accommodate him, but no transport company that can make him fully enjoy the tourist site he is going to or suitable accessible facilities for his entertainment and relaxation.

Given the project timeframe, of course, this network action has just been set up and will have to be fully developed. The service network should not include, of course, only those enterprises directly involved in the project but also any other enterprises that are already working paying attention to inclusiveness issues.

A particularly significant experience was, for example, the production of the *Dracénie et Accessibilité* guide (<https://tourisme.dracenie.com/dracenie-et-accessibilite/>) by the partner Dracénie Provence Verdon Agglomération, which lists all the accessible tourist enterprises in the Var region, including those of SOFIA.

Finally, it is important that the tourism enterprises that spent time and money trying to improve their services and establishments in terms of accessibility can be recognised and promoted. SOFIA did not create yet another quality label for accessible tourism, but determined the criteria for the creation of a service charter about accessibility that could be developed in the future to provide customers with the necessary information and guarantees concerning accessibility, usability, and accommodation for people with special needs.

Discussion

The adopted project methodology, with the development stages carried out and described above, proved to be very effective for the achievement of the project objectives. Actually, it has been so effective that it allowed carrying out the project despite the pandemic.

Covid 19 was a totally unforeseen problem that mostly led to the aforementioned problems with the involvement of the enterprises.

The project management and communication were also complicated by the pandemic: the partnership meetings initially planned to be held in person were actually almost exclusively held online. This circumstance did not, however, turn out to be entirely negative: although online communication made it somewhat more difficult for those involved to get to know each other and to communicate in the two official project languages (Italian and French), it did, on the other hand,

allow for a greater number of meetings and, above all, the involvement of non-local experts and an easier attendance by many disability experts, who were themselves disabled and could be more easily available in the various online meetings.

The project was therefore able to develop fully anyway, perhaps only missing a few opportunities for meetings in the field that would have been valuable. By the end of the project, however, as the critical conditions of Covid 19 had been almost completely overcome, it has still been possible to carry out some final in-person communication events, both in France and in Italy, with the involvement of several enterprises and local authorities.

On the whole, the experience of the SOFIA project proved to be important for many tourism enterprises that started to take an effective interest in the subject of accessibility. The work carried out in the involved areas has highlighted a strong lack of suitable establishments, services and skills, while also making it clear that such shortcomings are mostly due to a lack of culture and knowledge about the subject.

When entrepreneurs become aware of the issue and also of the potential for growth they could achieve by paying more attention to the accessibility of their establishments and services, they are generally very interested and willing to improve.

Conclusions

Projects like SOFIA can really help to develop and increase the sensitivity of tourism operators towards the issues associated with accessible tourism/tourism for all. More targeted funding is required, however, to make the accessibility solutions adopted in the new construction or refurbishment of accommodation establishments sustainable over time.

The SOFIA experts noticed the good will of the enterprises involved in the project when it came to provide their customers with better and more accessible services, but the financial resources of the involved enterprises and of the SOFIA project cannot guarantee complete, decisive and definitive actions for 41 enterprises. The work still to be done is then a challenging one and can only be carried out through additional funding.

It is, however, an important work from many points of view, namely those described above, but also from another one: tourism is a culture vector because travellers, during their holidays, can have new experiences that they then take back to their places of residence; tourism can then also provide an excellent means to spread the culture of accessibility and universal design.

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